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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a summary of two aspects of effective speaking in public, whether it be with co-workers, supervisors, friends, or a group of little-known or unknown others. One aspect of public speaking is the level of sincerity, and the other is the level and variety of skills used. The paper first considers sincerity and then, it discusses the skill areas in depth. It lists the skill areas as: (1) tone of voice; (2) hand gestures; (3) eye contact; (4) on your feet; (5) pace; (6) enthusiasm/knowledge; (7) organization; (8) general and specific; (9) use of language; (10) listening; (11) connecting with the audience; and (12) nervousness. The paper gives suggestions for self-assessment and offers ideas for next steps, including identifying likely strategies and an outline for a communications plan. (CR)

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# SPEAKING WITH CONFIDENCE

Gene Gousie

## Introduction

"The primary purpose of the speech is to communicate and thereby to influence human behavior." Lew Sarett

There's no getting around it: we talk all the time. We not only talk, we speak for specific purposes. We speak to connect with others, to express our thoughts and feelings, to voice our opinions, to get our needs met, and, among many other ends, to influence others and change the world.

If we don't speak up, no one can hear our voices and no one can be influenced by what we have to say. If we don't speak up, we can't contribute. However, speaking up by itself doesn't get us very far. We must not only speak up, but also make ourselves heard. A key to making ourselves heard is to speak with confidence.

There are two aspects to effective speaking in public, whether it be with co-workers, supervisors, friends, or a group of little-known or unknown others. One aspect is the level of sincerity you bring to your speech, the other is the level and variety of skills you use.

## Sincerity

"Be sincere. Be brief. Be seated." Franklin Delano Roosevelt

"Gene," says the boss, "you've been a hard and loyal worker for this company. We really value that." - this amidst a raft of layoffs. His smooth tone, oozing with concern, does little to convince me that he means what he's saying. I distrust his display of sincerity.

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If we truly listen to someone speak, we unconsciously read their body language and their tone of voice and gauge whether or not they are sincere in, and honest about, what they say. The same is true when we speak. Our listeners know quickly and surely if we are not sincere. We've all also seen speakers whose influence is, or could be, profound due primarily to their sincerity.

Lacking sincerity in speech, you will never make the kinds of contributions and reap the rewards of effective communications that you could through truthful, sincere speech. But sincerity, while essential, is not sufficient. There is a range of public presentation skills that will enable you to assess and respond to the needs of those with whom you are speaking. In the process, you are much more likely to get your needs met.

Skill Areas

Following are selected public speaking skill areas. While not an exhaustive list, attention to developing these competencies will enable you to communicate more effectively, whether one-on-one with a peer or supervisor, in a small group, or before a larger crowd.

**Tone of Voice**

Your tone of voice presents an enormous amount of information to your audience. It is the primary non-verbal message-sender, and informs your audience about your sincerity, your interest in the topic, your concern and warmth. It can help excite or soothe an audience, establish an emotional connection, and establish an atmosphere of trust.

A related topic is the pitch of your voice, the way it rises and falls within each statement. The pitch should match your sentence structure. In particular, you should end a declarative sentence with a dip in tone. "Hi, my name is Kath y." Not "Hi, my name is Kath y (?).

When the pitch of your voice rises at the end of a sentence, it is heard as a question. This, of course, if appropriate when you are asking a question. When you are making a declarative statement, your voice should go down in pitch at the end of the sentence. If it goes up, this is heard by the audience not as a question, since they know it isn't one, but as an uncertainty on your part, either about the topic, your knowledge or expertise, or your self-confidence. All of which undermine the power of your message.

**Hand gestures**

Hand gestures are an important means of communication and should more or less match what you are saying. Speaking should certainly not be a time when "the left hand knows not what the right hand is doing." Use your hands to emphasize important points, feelings and arguments. Try to vary your use of hand gestures, relying for a start on ones you are comfortable with.

Common misuse of hands includes repeating the same one or two gestures endlessly (e.g. George Bush and the hand chop), or flailing away at all times. I have been in restaurants where one highly expressive person interrupts the other by grabbing the other's hands, thus rendering the other expressive person incapable of finishing the sentence.

To improve your presentation (thus communication) skills if you are a "repeat" offender, try adding one gesture at a time to your repertoire. For the "flailing" condition, practice speaking with a textbook in each hand - extraneous gestures will tend to become diminished.

**Eye contact**

In this mainstream American culture, we tend to make initial and ongoing contact with those to whom we are communicating by establishing eye contact. While speaking in public, move around the room with your eyes, making contact with individuals. Hold their gaze for 3 seconds or so, move on, come back later - they'll be waiting for you. Do not stare over the heads

of the audience, as though transfixed by an apparition or the appearance of the Starship Enterprise.

It is important to note that there are strong cultural connotations with eye contact. While making eye contact is the norm across cultures, whether or not it is maintained and, if so, under what conditions varies according to who the participants are - young, old, male, female, empowered, disempowered. Know your audience and what the respectful means of communication with them include.

**On your feet**

Speaking on your feet provides opportunities to make important connections and presents potential difficulties as well. Stepping forward toward or into an audience is a powerful way to connect. Just remember the Bush-Clinton-Perot debate in 1992 during which they were seated on stools before a live audience. Clinton made a powerful statement just by getting off his stool and walking out into the audience. Talk show hosts and masters of ceremonies learned this long ago.

As you speak, stand straight, move about to make a point or as you move into a new section of your talk. Getting tied down to the lectern significantly diminishes your ability to exert the full range of nonverbal communications.

Common barriers to effective communications while you are speaking on your feet include slouching, putting a hand in your pocket, jangling your keys or change in your pocket, leaning, shifting from leg to leg, standing on one foot, or pacing the room.

**Pace**

Obviously, you'll want to speak in a manner that is neither so fast that an audience has difficulty keeping up nor so lackadaisical that they have time to balance their checkbooks between sentences. You create interest in what you

are saying by varying volume and pace, particularly as that variance is in sync with your message. If there is urgency in your message, that urgency must be communicated by your voice, which will include a slighter faster-than-normal pace. If you are making a very serious point, a slower pace would support your message. Know that the tendency of most people when they speak in public is to speed up considerably.

Related to pace is the use of the pause. There are two basic kinds of pauses. The first is a short break that lets the audience catch up to you, to think about a point you've just made. Your responsibility as a speaker is not just to fill the air non-stop with words, but to employ thoughts and feelings to convey your message. The audience will need a little time to think and feel things through with you. This brief pause also gives you an opportunity to assess the responsiveness of the audience, collect your wits should they have wandered, and make adjustments to your approach.

The other kind of pause is the dramatic pause, used mid-way through a statement to capture attention and get the audience thinking and wondering about how you will conclude the statement. It's like the pause before a joke's punch line. It's interesting that such a powerful device in a forum where you have control of the floor gives exactly an opposite signal in informal dialogue, where the pause is a signal (or at least an opportunity) for others to jump in with their say.

**Enthusiasm/knowledge**

"Straight thinking starts with facts. Careless thinking starts with opinions." William Kelly

If you are not interested in your topic or in the audience, they will have you pegged within 10 seconds and have turned their attention elsewhere within 12 seconds. If you are not knowledgeable about your topic, you'd better be awfully amusing.

**Organization**
When you have something to say, you want your audience to remember it, right? Expressing your thoughts in an organized fashion helps the audience recall them. Have one major point to make. Give examples of benefits or results. Remember the "power of 3," which suggests that you limit your main points or illustrations to three, a number of items we have all learned to remember. Tell them what you'll tell them. Tell them what you told them. Give them a hook, a framework, a story, a metaphor to hang your information on.

**General and specific**
General arguments, conclusions, synthesis statements are meaningful to an audience, but will lose meaning (and members of the audience, as well) if not supported by specific examples, facts, statistics, stories and anecdotes. Concrete examples will lose meaning if not incorporated into larger, meaningul conclusions and arguments. Do both throughout your talk. Make a statement; give an example. Tell a story; connect it to a general principle.

**Use of language**
It is all too easy to lapse into the jargon of your field, or of current management practice; to reference "paradigm shifts", make sure everything "dovetails" and "piggybacks", to do your thinking "out of the box" and "push the envelope." It's a great way to lose your audience. Get real. Where are they at? Talk to them so they can understand you without multiple translations. Use concrete language. Speak in short sentences. Think "Hemingway," not "Faulkner."

**Listening**
One of the things that you are always doing as a speaker is listening for (and watching for) feedback. You will best be able to respond to your audience to the extent that you have heard accurately (and deeply) what their concerns are, what their hopes are, what you can do for them.

**Connecting with the audience**
"The one completely unforgivable fault in speaking is to neglect the audience."

While everything you have been doing fosters or hinders your connection with the audience, the question here is that old Toastmasters query: "Why this speech, at this time, to this audience?" It presupposes that you have a specific purpose for speaking and that you know your audience well. This may call for considerable research on your part. The preparation then enables you to respond flexibly as appropriate.

**Nervousness**
Your opportunity to speak has almost arrived. You know precisely what you want to say, to whom, and how you will appeal to others. You are also extremely nervous! You are sweating and all of the butterflies from Mexico have somehow gotten inside your stomach.

This happens to all of us. The bad news is, this nervousness can tear us apart, imobilize us, cause us to shut down and mumble incoherently. The good news is aplenty: everyone gets a bit nervous; the nervous energy is something you can work with; only you know just how nervous you are; and, if you have prepared adequately, you have a base of understanding and argument to rely on.

Stretching, deep breathing, visualization, humor, centering, reminding yourself of your purpose, progress and abilities: these are all common strategies that enable speakers to move beyond their nervousness, make it work for them, and communicate confidently and effectively with others.

Self-Assessment

Take a few minutes to consider each of the categories described above. Then assess your abilities in each area. Here are three kinds of designations you can make.

**1. Proficient**:
I already speak skillfully in this area. It's one of my strengths when I communicate with others. Although I am always looking to improve in this area, it's not one I would target for special attention at this time.

**2. Not Sure**:
My skills may vary in this area. Sometimes this can be a strength, sometimes a weakness. I need more feedback in order to know how effective I am and what next steps I might take to improve.

**3. Needs Attention**:
I know I can significantly improve my ability to communicate by focusing efforts here.

For those categories you've assessed as "Not Sure", find a couple trusted friends or colleagues whom you can count on for fairly objective feedback. Depending on the skill you want to assess, you could also audio or video-tape yourself in action and use that information to make a designation.

Next Steps

Now that you've assessed your current skills, it's time to look to the future. What one change, one improvement, could you make that (1) you can do without extraordinary effort and (2) would make a difference in your ability to communicate? Start there.

Little progress gets make in developing communications skills without some measure of feedback. How can you get and make use of the feedback you need in order to gauge your effects and improve your speaking abilities?

**Identify likely strategies**:
Find friends or colleagues who will "tell it like it is" when you ask them to assess a particular skill, who can be an ongoing part of your ongoing support network.

Video-taping yourself while speaking is an extremely powerful tool. Many of us have never seen ourselves in action that way. Don't be too hard on yourself.

Audio-taping has similar, though more limited, potential to enable you to focus on the qualities of your voice, your language, your organization and your pace.

Use these tools to evaluate your efforts giving the same talk several times. This can really help stabilize one variable, the speech, thus enabling you to pay particular attention to delivery.

**Outline for a Communications Plan**:
Most persons benefit from writing down and keeping track of their efforts. Here's an outline for doing so.

COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

Area for Improvement:

If I were to improve my skills in this area, what would it look (sound, feel) like?

How can I develop this skill?

1.

2.

3.

What are my resources?

Who are my support persons?

Timelines: Next date for review:

How will I know I have made progress?